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Sample of clubs and junior players

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New York

Children's voices in mini soccer: an exploration of critical incidents

Running heads:

Soccer & Society

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Since being adopted by **theThe** English Football Association as the preferred format of football to be played by children aged 10 and under, mini soccer has evolved and expanded into a popular activity for children. Yet little is known about the experiences of those participating in the game. In addition, adult-organized activities such as mini soccer are increasingly seen by parents and adults as suitable pursuits for their children to participate in. Yet the perspective of the child participating in mini soccer, as with many other activities, is largely ignored in academic literature. This is especially true in the social sciences, where research has historically been done 'on' children, rather than 'with' children. In this study, we seek to address this imbalance by including children as active participants in the research process. In doing so, we devised a methodology based on audiovisual methods to create participatory conditions between children and researchers interested in investigating their experiences of mini soccer in England. Children were asked to identify aspects of their experience which they felt were noteworthy to create video recordings of critical incidents that directly involved them participating in mini soccer. These were used as a discussion tool in focus groups to explore how and why children felt the incidents were critical, and how their experience of them shaped their participation. The methodology employed helped capture children's differentiated views of the same incidents, and highlighted the diversity of their experiences. It is recommended that similar audiovisual methodologies are employed to inform future policy and strategy development in grassroots football that includes children as participants.

Introduction

Children growing up in developed societies have increasingly taken part in organized sporting activities structured by adults. For a variety of reasons and societal pressures, parents have sought to include children in such activities for the presumed pro-social development of an array of competencies preparing them for transition to adulthood.¹ In addition, participation in organized sporting activities has largely been perceived by parents as a diversionary and protective tool in ensuring children are not attracted towards negative social behaviours, or are exposed to perceptibly potentially harmful unsupervised environments.² Parents have also been noted to place their children in, and are increasingly willing to pay to do so; organized sporting activities under the assumption they may maximize sporting potential. Evidently, a milieu of prevailing social processes appear to have reinforced the perceived desire to offer ever increasingly routinized, structured and organized activity at ever younger ages for children. Whilst these rationalized forms of childhood activity are largely designed and organized by adults, the perspective of the child in relation to these activities has remained marginalized in both the fields of practice and academia.³ As such, these activities appear to prioritize the interests of adults rather than children, under the assumption that they are best developed in the interests of children. Authors within the field of the sociology of childhood⁴ suggest children have effectively become disempowered in losing the propensity to engage in and take responsibility for their own play.

In England, mini soccer for children aged between the ages of 7 and 11 has emerged within these wider societal processes. This coincided with an increasingly interventionist approach to achieve sport-related objectives in England by successive governments since the late 1990s.⁵ Government policies and strategies modernized the English sports system⁶ as **theThe** FA shifted from an administrative body to a developmental and strategic organization.⁷ In addition, **theThe** FA had declared that a strategy and plan for the development of grassroots football was urgently needed to increase long-term participation and enhance the technical ability of junior players against a perceived long-term decline in the regularity and quality of schools and junior football.⁸ Notably, **theThe** FA suggested a 'child centred approach' was required, and that it was 'quite appropriate ... to take a lead and prescribe', in the best interests of the children, 'the most appropriate forms of organised football participation for a four year introduction to 11 aside football for children under 10 years of age'.⁹ It was proposed all children should receive coaching from qualified football coaches, and play on

appropriate facilities on a regular basis. In aiming to raise standards of provision in grassroots, particularly junior, football, the Charter for Quality proposed that small-sided club football marketed under ‘mini soccer’ be introduced for children under 10.¹⁰

Most recently, the FA Youth development review sought to revise the ‘player pathway’ and reinforce the prioritization of ‘children’s wants and needs at the forefront of the participatory experience’ in light of a win-at-all-costs mentality perceived to have accompanied the original incarnation of mini soccer which stifled development and enjoyment.¹¹ The document further embedded the dualistic emphasis on sustaining and increasing participation by enhancing enjoyment, whilst developing the technical ability of players, based on the assumption that small-sided games will provide children with an increase in touches, shots, dribbles and goals.¹²

According to Brackenridge, mini soccer is a smaller version of the adult game, designed to prepare children to progress into adult 11 a side players.¹³ This developmental approach to children in football underscores the traditional framework within the sociology of childhood that views children in false dichotomous and binary terms.¹⁴ That is, what children are expected to become (adults) rather than who and what they actually are. The developmental approach views children as ‘unfinished’, requiring continuous involvement of adults in order to develop into full members of society; as passive beneficiaries partaking in activities that prepare them for adulthood. Socialization of the child is required to bring children within the structures of the social system, imposed, as it were, in a top-down fashion with adults tending to needs.¹⁵

Despite much methodological and theoretical advancement in the field of the sociology of childhood¹⁶ an abstracting of children predominates in social scientific practice.¹⁷ Much social science-based sports literature focusing on children tends to assume they’re the objects of research, marginalizing the child voice.¹⁸ Whilst such research is informative, it tends to subordinate children in the process, limits our understanding to largely one-sided accounts, and treats children as incomplete members of society. Yet children are valued active research collaborators,¹⁹ and have subjective worlds worth exploring in their own right to deepen our understanding of them,²⁰ in developing a deeper, congruent understanding of their sporting experiences.

The inclusion of children in the research process by the FA for the youth development review is indeed a welcome step. Yet, despite the scale and intensity of mini soccer practice and changes becoming more ‘child centred’, children’s voices still appear to be relatively marginalized. Within the sample of people the FA consulted, children constituted 50 groups of 8–12-year olds and 16 Regional ‘Your Kids Your Say’ Road shows in amongst consultation with adults from over 300 Youth Leagues, 1000 Youth Club Administrators, and over 4000 volunteers and coaches.²¹

We seek to emphasize that children’s experiences are as equally worthy of consideration as those that tend to shape their participatory experiences, i.e. adults. This paper therefore seeks to emphasize children’s voices in exploring their experiences of adult-organized mini soccer within the social networks within which they are enmeshed. In doing so, we seek to build on the research of Brackenridge et al.,²² and the FA²³ by understanding mini soccer from the position of the child. With the sociology of childhood in mind, we sought to employ research methods that prioritized children’s voices²⁴ and involved children as participants in the research process. We devised a methodology to allow young children to reflect on and discuss ‘critical incidents’ occurring within their participation in mini soccer.

Methods

The research procedure utilized audiovisual methods to generate critical incidents as a stimuli for discussion. Visual methods to generate qualitative data are becoming more prominent in facilitating the understanding and exploration of children’s experiences and perspectives of sport contexts.²⁵ To date, the predominant techniques appear to have centred on the use of drawings or photographs as a stimuli for subsequent discussion.²⁶ We encouraged child participants to reflect upon and discuss their experiences by video recording matches that directly involved them, and using the recordings as a reflective tool within a focus group setting to generate discussion. This ensured that the data collection involved children within the naturalistic setting of mini soccer, rather than contrived settings in which much research with children is depicted.²⁷

The practice of identifying critical incidents is particularly suited to creating participatory conditions between researchers and participants.²⁸ Adapted from the field of educational research, critical incidents are straightforward accounts of commonplace events that occur in routine practice. Incidents become critical in the sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures.²⁹ Complementing an interpretivist position, critical incidents are produced by the interpretation of the significance of aspects of an event. This of course requires a value judgement to be made as to what is important and what stands out, i.e. the significance we attach to the meaning of an incident. According to Tripp,³⁰ there are two important stages in the ‘creation’ of critical incidents.

Creating critical incidents in mini soccer

First, the production of an incident: the observation and recall of a particular event or happening. In creating critical incidents for analysis, we therefore attempted to ensure the voices of the children were central generating incidents perceived to be noteworthy during matches in which they had played. Three teams representing under 8s, under 9s and under 10s, mini soccer age groups were video recorded participating in organized league fixtures on a weekly basis in the north of England between January and April 2011 (Table 1). Pseudonyms have been provided in order to hide the teams' and players' identities.

Table 1.

Team	Age range of children	No. of focus group participants
Eastcrook	7–8	8
Harvest JFC	8–9	8
Rancher JFC	9–10	10

Cameras were positioned in two locations in order to provide coverage of the field of play and spectators. Camera 1 was positioned at the half way line on the side-line of the team being recorded, and was operated manually to follow the ball through passages of play. The camera was also fitted with a microphone to pick up verbal noise and chatter from spectators, players and officials. Camera 2 was fixed, and positioned at a point behind the corner flag on the side-line of the spectators of respective teams being recorded. At the end of each game, players were informally asked about any moments of significance in relation to opposition players, officials and parent spectators in addition to their own team.³¹ Of course, this generated significant debate. Therefore, the children were asked to identify the top three incidents they had recalled in terms of those they felt occurred not just in the match they had immediately participated in, but also those that occurred most frequently in their participation more generally. These observations were then logged in a notebook, to be identified on the video recordings to be clipped for analysis. The inclusion of children in identifying the critical incidents directly after their games was participatory in nature, and diluted the power relationship³² between the children and adult researchers.

Examining critical incidents in mini soccer

Tripp³³ suggests there is no one immutable way to analyse critical incidents. Where the final analysis ends depends upon the interpretation of those involved, and the significance they place upon it.³⁴ Video recordings were clipped into 12 separate critical incidents for each team, and organized into alike categories.³⁵ This was undertaken to provide a semblance of structure to the clips for the purpose of generating discussion. Each clip lasted between 32 and 90 seconds. Focus groups for each team were organized for one evening at the end of the season, in which each clip was visually replayed back to the children on a giant screen in a local football club social club. At the end of each clip, a verbal discussion was generated as to why the children had initially felt the incident was significant, why they felt the incident occurred and how the incident made them feel. The replication of the social context of experiencing their mini soccer participation as a team within the group also enabled the researchers to focus upon the interaction between the children.³⁶ The use of focus groups directly involving the children allowed numerous voices to be heard simultaneously, and provided an opportunity for a wide array of individual and communal perspectives to be represented.³⁷ Moreover, the differential, and similar experiences of group members were highlighted in recalling the same critical incident. In addition, the informal and relaxed way in which the researchers conducted the discussion facilitated the interaction between group members and researchers, allowing for elaboration where appropriate on issues wider than the context of mini soccer. This allowed the group to challenge or support each other's views, providing a potentially more realistic account³⁸ of the nuances of children's experiences in mini soccer. As is common in focus groups with children,³⁹ there was a tendency for some children at times to lose focus on the task. Therefore, probing questions and prompts were used by the researchers to refocus the children on the task discussing the video clip they had just observed.

Parents and coaches of the children were present in the room, but were not part of, or in hearing distance, of the focus group. In addition, the hosting of the focus groups in an environment familiar to the children with non-significant adult researchers (i.e. not an authoritative figure such as a parent or coach) that had been present at all of their games, also reinforced an informal atmosphere and further reduced the hierarchical adult – child relationship.⁴⁰ Encouraging children to identify and reflect upon incidents that are important to them within their mini soccer participation illuminated deep cultures and structures. Indeed, the use of video clips (children's responses being identified as C1–C10 within their respective focus group contribution) also allowed the children to recall and generalize more broadly over similar incidents they had experienced in mini soccer. For the purposes of the paper, the incidents have been grouped in relation to the actors that children focused on when originally identifying the incident such as, other child players (both opposing and team mates), referees (both adult and under 18), spectators, parents and coaches. A selection of 10 critical incidents of the 36 collated

across all three teams are presented for the discussion below.⁴¹

Incidents with players and coaches

Children identified the following incidents with their coach as critical based upon the *manner* in which instructions and behaviour were portrayed. These included shouting tactical information and remonstrating with the decisions of officials.

Critical incident 1

An Eastcrook player has the ball at his feet in his own penalty area, and directly in front of his own team's goal. There are a lot of players from both teams in close proximity. Directly in front of him, is an opposition player. From the side-lines, the Eastcrook coach can be heard shouting aggressively whilst waving his arms in the air 'clear it, get it away'. The player from Eastcrook stands still and hesitates before attempting to execute a 'step over' to trick the opposition player. The opposition player steps forward and dispossess the Eastcrook player and then shoots accurately into the corner of the Eastcrook goal from approximately eight yards. Whilst the opposition are celebrating, the Eastcrook coach can be seen encroaching slightly onto the playing area, and is heard shouting 'Charlie, Charlie, you need to clear it from there, what are you doing taking him on? That's stupid. You've just cost us a goal'. The coach then shakes his head, talking to parents with his arms out his side, whilst Charlie bows his head, alone, and stands still until play resumes. Some spectators can be heard shouting 'don't worry Charlie, keep going'.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

C5 stated 'He wants us to win and Charlie messed up', C3 continued 'yeah we lost that game'. C1 noted 'he shouted coz the mistake cost us', whereas C4 added 'I didn't mean it, but I know not to do that'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C1 stated, 'Makes you feel bad coz they might not play coz they might feel right I'm not playing now because they feel bad'. C2 quickly contributed 'Not good because it can put your team off', whilst C3 adds almost immediately 'They shouldn't be shouting bad things, it puts you off'. After an initial pause, other children contribute 'If they shout good things that's ok coz that makes you feel good', and 'yeah when you do something good' (C4 and C5, respectively). The interpretation continues 'Sometimes it can make you happy if its encouragement' (C6) but C7 notes, 'Sometimes it can make you sad'. C6 then adds as though in thought 'Yeah a bit (it happens) it's your manager trying to encourage ya' with C4 adding 'They encourage ya a lot'.

Critical incident 2

An Eastcrook player is challenged by an opposition player in the penalty area, approximately six yards away from the goal-line, slightly to the right. It appears as though the opposition player trips the Eastcrook player without touching the ball, just as the Eastcrook player is about to shoot towards the goal. The Eastcrook coach walks forward encroaching onto the pitch, displaying emotive body language with arms in the air, shouting loudly and aggressively at the referee from approximately 20 m away 'Ay that's a penalty, you've gotta be joking ref, he's just tripped him up'. The coach then turns to the side-line of the pitch and makes mildly derogatory comments about the referee to spectator parents.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

C3 noted 'Our manager running down the pitch with his arms up' with C5 interjecting 'Coz he thought it was a penalty' and C7 adding 'He did it because he wanted a pen' and almost immediate with their contribution C6: 'He raised his hands up because he wanted the pen'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C2 initially answers 'Intimidated' with C7 adding 'It's not ok for him to do that'. C2, in further agreement 'No it's not alright to do that coz it puts you off'. C1 then explains 'He was on the pitch, that's not ok' with C3 saying 'He should be off the pitch doing it because sometimes the ball can just come and hit him, he could get in the way and it could go onto the goal and they could score'. C1 continues 'We played this team and the manager was throwing his cap off and everything' with C6 stating 'He was throwing it onto the pitch. I seen him coming onto the pitch and hugging the player' (C4). C1 then adds 'He shouldn't do that coz it could waste time and when injury time comes it could be about half an hour and all the parents might be shouting at the manager ... That wouldn't be good', but C3 then contributes 'But for them (parents) sometime it is, but for him (manager) it's not'. C2 then states 'Its putting you off as well – if your dad went to the manager what are you doing, it could put you off coz your worrying your dad could get into trouble', whilst C1 further notes 'It puts you off, feels like he is going to come and do something to your parents', 'It puts the team off' (adds C5), 'I see it sometimes ... Not a lot, not really' (C4 responds).

Incidents with players and parent spectators

Similar to incidents with coaches, the children identified incidents with parent spectators and commented on the *manner* of instructional and tactical information provided. In addition, the children also noted both positive and negative feelings about comments made by parent spectators towards individuals and the whole group of players (own team and the opposition).

Critical incident 3

Eastbrook score a goal. From a central position, Barrie passes the ball to Jake in a wide position in the opposition half. Jake runs past an opposition player with the ball and passes into the centre of the opposition penalty area where George runs onto the ball and shoots past the goalkeeper. All **AQ3** Eastbrook players except the goalkeeper run towards George celebrating by hugging George, patting George on the back and with 'hi 5s'. There is a loud cheer from the group of spectator parents on the side-line, as the children involved in the passage of play are verbally praised with audible shouts of 'well done Barrie, good pass' 'brilliant Jake, great cross' 'good goal George, well done'.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

C5 announces 'Goal by me, I scored a goal', *C3 states* 'We celebrated' and *C1 describes* 'The crowd cheered and said well done' ... 'They were shouting loudly'. *C4 and C2 note, respectively*, 'We always get a clap when somebody scores' and 'Only if it's like another team and none of the parents were there for the other team they would clap them as well'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C4 notes 'That's good' with *C5* 'Made me happy' and 'The team will feel nice' (*C2 noted*). 'Making them happy' *C1 adds, then further clarifying*, 'Makes them have more confidence'. *C2 continues* 'Everyone should get clapped not just the player who scored' with *C1 summarizing that* 'The parents were happy'.

Critical incident 4

The opposition score a goal against Harvest JFC. The parent spectators on the side-line supporting Harvest FC applaud the opposition as the players reorganize to restart the game. Parent spectators audibly praise the opposition with comments 'well done, good goal' and 'fantastic football, good stuff'. Following this, the parent spectators then audibly encourage Harvest FC players 'come on boys heads up, you can get back into this'.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

C1: 'They scored a goal and our line clapped' and *C2 added* 'That was good because it encourages the other team'. 'It shows respect' (*C5*) and 'It was a good goal so they clapped' (*C3*). *C7 further noted their opinion* 'I don't like our line clapping the other team, they should be clapping us' whilst *C4 positions themselves too*; 'We're clapping and they don't clap for us no because they're all from them (rival team from nearby area) they're horrible there'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C3 starts ... 'It makes you feel alright as long as they clap us too'. 'I don't mind it' *states C5*, 'But they are not bothered about us, it's not nice' *C7 interjects*.

Incidents with opposition players

Whilst the above incidents in relation to adults generally focused on verbal instruction and comments from the side-lines, the following incidents centred on their feelings towards opposition players within the context of participating within the game. In particular, children commented in a variety of ways on perceived foul play, sportsmanship, and pro-social and anti-social behaviours by their own and opposing players alike.

Critical incident 5

A Harvest JFC tries to dribble past an opposition player. The opposition player dispossess him and moves forward into the Harvest JFC half of the field in a wide area. The Harvest JFC player turns and attempts to catch up with the opposition player. And as he approaches the opposition player from the back, he runs into him, knocking him to the ground. The referee awards the free kick. The Harvest JFC player assists the opposition player to his feet, and can be audibly heard saying 'sorry, are you ok?'

When asked to explain what happened and why,

C1 explains, 'Done a tackle' with *C6 discussing their role* 'I helped someone up after I fouled him'. *C5 now continues* 'That's good because he

showed sportsmanship'. *C3 now explains the impact with 'It's like he is apologising for the foul' and C2 adds 'It's like he is concerned about him' to describe the situational event.*

When asked how this made the children feel,

C2 stated – 'it makes you feel good / better if they help you', C1 continued 'yeah its good when the other team are nice to you', whereas C7 noted 'but not when they're from them (rival team from nearby area), they're never nice and I'm never nice to them'. C5 however, added 'yeah but I would do it, I don't care what they do'.

Critical incident 6

An Eastcrook player is fouled in the centre of the pitch, and falls to the floor. The player stays on the floor as play continues as the referee deems that Eastcrook still have possession of the ball. The Eastcrook coach tells the Eastcrook player in possession to kick the ball out of play to stop the game, so that he can enter the field of play to assist the Eastcrook player on the floor, who is in tears. The Eastcrook coach attends to the player, who is assisted to his feet, and regains his composure. The opposition coach and referee instruct the player to return the ball to the Eastcrook goalkeeper. There is a round of applause from most spectator parents.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

'It was a foul and they gave the ball back to the opposition coz they played on' opens C3. C5 notes to clarify understanding 'They played the advantage' and C6 'It was good for them to give the ball back coz its sportsmanship'. C5 further tries to explain 'If they have done it to you it's like giving it back to them' ... 'See lots of sportsmanship' clarifies C1. C2 then explains 'Could try and get a goal if you get the ball back' with C3 adding in 'It happens quite a lot'. C6 and C7 respond, respectively, with 'No I don't, we usually stop and have a free kick' and 'I don't really see that', whilst C4 intervenes 'I see it sometimes ...'

When asked how this made the children feel,

C2 continues 'It could make you sad if you do it if they score, you could lose' but with C5 adding 'It makes you feel good coz its friendly', C7 then quickly responds with 'You have to do it coz the ref tells you' before the conversation ceases.

Critical incident 7

A Rancher JFC player is attempting to tackle an opposition player in a position close to the corner of the pitch towards the opposition's goal line. The Rancher JFC player wins the tackle, and in the process knocks the opposition player to the side with his upper body. The opposition player falls on his side. The opposition player quickly regains a standing position, and jumps forward with his legs together whilst simultaneously dropping to the floor in a seated position. His feet collide with the feet of the Rancher JFC player who, on seeing this movement, has moved the ball away and is fouled. The Rancher JFC player falls to the floor. Spectator parents and the Rancher coach shout loudly at the referee for a foul and complain to the referee as to the fierceness of the tackle. A free kick is awarded and the referee ensures the opposition player and the Rancher JFC player shake hands.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

'There was a foul, in the corner and he got back up and fouled the other one' (C5). 'That's cheeky coz he thinks he got me so I will get him' (C4 further adds). C1 now tries to explain 'He's got up just to get him down' and C2 carries on the discussion 'He did it because he was angry'. Here though C3 adds 'I don't see it much' yet C2 now explains 'I tackled him and he slid in two footed and put me into the corner flag, it made me feel bad and sad'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C1 begins with their emotions: 'It's our team and makes me feel bad coz it's not sportsmanship', whilst C4 contributes 'If someone from the other has hit them first it is not that bad, there is a reason what they will do it for'. C3 now tries to explain the situation: 'There is a reason coz he has done it to you' ... 'Or you could just ask for the free kick' (C2 'chips in'). C7 continues 'Yeah you have to get him back or he thinks he is better than you', whilst C3 builds upon this reasoning with 'It's not good but you have to do it'. C2 however, contradicts one or two answers with 'It's not ok to do that though ...'

Incidents with officials

The majority of incidents identified by children relating to officials centred on the decisions made during the game. These included the reactions of team mates and adult, parent spectators commenting on referee decisions. Children also noted gamesmanship, citing examples from professional football

that informed their feelings towards understanding their own behaviour, and that of opponents and adults.

Critical incident 8

A Rancher JFC player attempts to tackle an opposition player close to the opposition penalty area. The Rancher JFC player appears to trip the opposition, who falls to the ground. The Rancher JFC player takes the ball and moves forward towards the opposition goalkeeper. The referee blows his whistle and signals a foul to the opposition. The Rancher JFC player, upon hearing the whistle, kicks the ball off the field of play in an aggressive manner and throws his arms up in the air. The audio is not clear, but the Rancher JFC player is observed talking at the referee whilst shaking his head side to side.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

Almost immediately C5 offers an explanation of the events: 'The player kicked it away', whereby C3 now clarifies 'Player's arguing with the referee because he is angry'. C2 states 'We don't think that he made the right decision but the video shows that he did' and C8 assures 'It was the right decision'. Yet here, C2 further notes 'We always moan anyway because you want to get the ball', but C4 adds 'Because you are frustrated because we lost the ball, and we could have scored from that'. 'It's the players fault coz he can't do it properly (throw the ball in)' and 'Everyone would get fouled – You need the referee though otherwise everyone would get snapped' immediately following the last remarks from C6 and C1, respectively, C4 now explains 'If you didn't have the ref you would be able to do bad tackles' ... and concludes 'It happens a lot'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C4 now reasons 'It would have a bad effect because they could score', with C7 adding 'It's not good the way he reacted because he might get all the other players frustrated', and 'He might get a fine' further noted from C3 within the group.

Critical incident 9

An opposition player is deemed by the referee to have been fouled by a Rancher JFC player, close to the Rancher JFC penalty area, slightly right from centre. The offending player is observed questioning the referee, but accepts the decision and walks into the penalty area. On taking the free kick, an opposition player kicks the ball into the penalty area, where another opposition player strikes first time into the Rancher JFC goal. A parent spectator is observed walking aggressively from a position opposite from where the free kick was taken, towards the centre of the field where the camera is located. The parent spectator can audibly be heard to be swearing in the direction of the referee and to himself adding 'What a joke that was never a free kick'.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

C2 confidently states 'The man was swearing' before C5 states abruptly 'The keeper then was shit'. C2 then explains 'The fella was walking on AQ4 the pitch, angry' ... 'He was shouting 'what are you doing lad get on the pitch and score a goal', with C4 contributing 'He was throwing his arms out because it was a bad free kick'. C3 now reflects, 'What if it was you who took the free kick? It would make you feel bad' and C2 again reasoning 'It might be you that they are moaning at, and that is bad'.

C1 now mentions 'He can't give you a hug he could be a paedo', whereas C3 states that 'He might just be complaining about something stupid'. At this point, C6 is critical of the incident 'He swore, he can't do that, its bad language' ... 'He shouldn't be doing that'. But again at this point, C2 continues 'I hear it all the time, especially the M word and the C word' and C7 sums up their perception with 'It's not good behaviour'. It is at this point C1 recites their own experiences of such situations of behaviour: 'If you're in our house you have to pay 20p', with C2 also resorting to explain their behaviour 'I've already been suspended 5 times for all kinds, bad tackles, shouting at the referee'. At this point C8 tries to justify the incident with 'It's ok to swear at the referee if he gives a very bad decision yeah'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C5 now builds upon their understanding. 'If the ref made a very very bad decision you have got to give him training so you have to react' and C4 interprets 'It means they are bad supporters if they swear'. C2: 'You do get frustrated though, especially if they give a very bad decision and it costs you the game, yeaah', with C6 adding 'The whole team and the line get frustrated'. The additional interpretations are then provided from C7: 'You might be like losing and it might be the last couple of minutes and there is a penalty decision which he doesn't give and the line or the team might swear', C2 now provides their interpretation, 'You have to let the ref know if it's a bad decision don't ya'.

Critical incident 10

A Harvest JFC player dribbles forwards with the ball towards the edge of the opposition penalty area. An opposition player tries to deliberately trip

up the Harvest JFC player. Despite losing his balance, the Harvest JFC player manages to stay on his feet, but is falling forwards as he shoots awkwardly towards the opposition goal. The ball trickles towards the opposition goalkeeper who picks the ball up. Parent spectators are shouting at the referee to give a free kick. The referee indicates the opposition goalkeeper to continue play.

When asked to explain what happened and why,

'They pulled him out of the way' *utters C6*, and 'They stuck his foot out to try and trip him over' *articulates C3*. *C2 mentions* 'They did slidey tackles', *but C1 describes* 'He stayed on his feet it was good coz he was carrying on and trying to score'. *C5 builds upon that understanding with* 'He didn't want to get a free kick he wanted to score a goal for his own or set one up'. 'It's good coz when you do that like you might get something better like you get better encouragement when you do that but when you get fouled everyone comes around and the game stops' *further contributes C7*. *C8 continues* 'If he had gone down he might of got a free kick and the free kick might not have been in a good area or gone anywhere so it was good for his team he is trying to win', *with C3 concluding* 'If he tripped over he couldn't pass it on'. *C7 now further adds* 'If he had of fell down the other team might have got the ball' *and* 'He would have been in trouble if he fell down coz the other team might have ran down the line and scored' (*adds C6*). *C2 continues* 'It has happened to me and I have done it to someone, they went in for a "slidey" and I jumped over his leg and nearly scored'. *C6 then interjects* 'I did it once and we scored off it coz I jumped over his leg and passed it on and we scored' *with C4 further contributing* 'Yeah Ronaldo and Drogba, coz if you tackled them they just fall over'. *C1 utters* 'It's a disgrace' *whilst C7 poses his response* 'Steven Gerrard doesn't do it'. *Thoughtfully, after a couple of seconds, C3 contributes* 'Everyone does it once in a while', *but C1 concludes shortly in response* 'It is still bad doesn't matter who does it'.

When asked how this made the children feel,

C6 opens with 'Makes you nervous coz if you get past them sometimes a couple of minutes later they might snap you coz you beat them last time'. 'Yeah it's like they look silly so want to get you back' (*C8 responds*). 'I just feel the same' (*further C1*).

Discussion – children's perspectives of critical incidents in mini soccer

We have sought to emphasize children's experiences of mini soccer within the social networks of relations in which they are enmeshed. By seeking to understand mini-soccer from the position of the child, we sought to prioritize the voice of the child in juxtaposition to the predominant 'developmental' view in research 'on' children. As such, we have presented data in its raw unedited form that illustrates children's understanding and feelings in relation to this form of adult-organized football. Rather than passive beneficiaries of activities, we explored children's routine and common experiences of participating in grassroots football at mini soccer level by devising a methodology which allowed young children to be active participants in the research process, and reflect on and discuss 'critical incidents' in which they were involved in mini soccer. Our use of video recordings within a focus group setting as a visual stimulus to prompt children to discuss critical incidents that they themselves had identified was useful in understanding why children felt particular aspects of their experience were noteworthy, and how their experiences of these incidents made them feel. In addition, the use of authentic material appeared to engage the children in an enthusiastic and engaging manner. This not only allowed the children to recall the actual event after previously noting it as a critical incident, but also helped the children to explain and clarify their understanding and reasoning. As a result, the recollection of experiences via either group or individual perspectives were communicated⁴² revealing deep cultures and structures that are not readily identifiable. Yet, whilst the children's perspectives were differentiated, their experiences were neither homogenized nor unique. The methodology employed exposed different interpretations and feelings regarding similar critical incidents that occur regularly in mini soccer. The children varied between their explanations and depth of answers, possibly due to variation of ages across the three clubs interviewed. However, children both agreed and disagreed with one another, whilst offering their interpretation and their own views.

Consistent with Walters et al.,⁴³ the children across all age ranges and teams identified fun, competition and sportsmanship, which interlaced all critical incidents. Whilst the intention of the article is to prioritize the child voice to present a more reality congruent illustration of children's experiences of mini soccer, the findings do present some theoretical pointers highlighting the often hidden and deeper culture that shape children's participatory experiences. The discussion of critical incidents in relation to opposing players and the officials appeared to centre on sportsmanship, particularly between anti-social and pro-social behaviours⁴⁴ witnessed and the different meanings and emphases attributed to them. Whilst some explained feeling anxiety regarding possible retributive behaviours of opposing players, others expressed justification and a desire for retributive behaviour not just in terms of winning, but in the context of rivalry between teams.

It is noteworthy that children predominantly identified critical incidents in relation to the adults within the network of social relations that form part of their participatory experience in mini soccer. Perhaps it was largely inevitable that the children would identify the excessive behaviours of parents and

coaches⁴⁵ towards winning and competition as being an incidents worthy of note. Yet what is revealing are the differences between members of the same team as to the justification of such behaviours and how this shaped each individual's experience. Competition appeared to be desired, but in the context of rivalry between teams as an inherent part of the enjoyment. Whereas competition underpinned by an over emphasis on winning exhibited in the behaviours of those involved in the children's networks were noted as more problematic or negative. Some viewed coaches' and parents' vociferous and emotive manner in communicating with children in the context of providing tactical or technical information within the confines of a competitive match as negative, whilst others were more accepting of such behaviour. Although largely empirically anecdotal, it has been noted elsewhere that children of this age group are at risk of attrition from organized sport when perceptions of their experiences are negatively shaped by adults.⁴⁶ Those that continue to participate and tend to share the latter view are noted as conforming to a discourse of competition with an emphasis on playing to win in junior, adult-organized sporting activity.⁴⁷ Whilst informative, such dichotomous views do not expose the complexities of children's participation in organized sport. Rather than reducing children's experiences to mono-causal explanations, we have illustrated that children often have different perceptions of shared experiences such as mini soccer, in which they have been a part. In addition, the methodology illustrated the wider sociocultural context that shaped their feelings and interpretations of their participatory experience. Some children connected the more negative types of experience associated with adults, particularly spectators, with wider social fears regarding dangers to their well-being. Further evidence of the *child's voice* clearly needs to be heard, but discoveries from this particular methodological approach established that no matter what takes place in the context of mini soccer, the deeper cultural perspectives will contribute and such outside issues are actually positioned within it. In agreement with Cope and colleagues,⁴⁸ we argue that audiovisual methods of this nature, although time consuming, allow for a deeper understanding of children's experience that policy-makers and practitioners may be wise to adopt and include in the devising of policies and strategies in grassroots football. By including children, not only would policy design be more inclusive in nature, but also the efficacy of policy and strategy implementation would be better served by drawing on children's views. This is crucial since it is common that policy decisions intended to impact on young people's lifeworlds are usually informed by adults who frequently act on behalf of, and for, young people without always taking into account their needs and priorities. Future policy in junior and youth grassroots football would do well to take seriously the experiences children have of the game, not least if the intention of those who organize and administer it are concerned with providing children with positive and meaningful experiences which maximize their participation in the short and longer term.

Conclusion

We have attempted to present an authentic view of children's cognizance of mini soccer (and the environment surrounding it) in which they partake. The methodology employed allowed the possibility to galvanize and shed light on the experiences of the children, for whom this modified version of football, actually matter. The purpose of this paper was not to make claims regarding desired provision for mini soccer, but to illustrate experiences of the children that participate by providing them with a voice. This modified version of football should encompass seeing the game through *their eyes* and their perspectives, allowing greater opportunity to understand their experience.⁴⁹ The incidents with shared perspectives are an opportunity to allow adults into the children's line of thinking and understanding, whilst acknowledging the small responses and discussions that the children may have with each other. These are talking points that children no doubt discuss away from the adult 'eye', who may forget how they once seen the game of football or understood their roles, behaviours and development within it as a child. Allowing the children to contribute and not merely partake, rather than be evaluated, provided arguably a more real account.

This is not always articulated in research with children due to the interpretation of the respective author. Often, versions of events can be *lost in translation*, misinterpreted or even overlooked if children's power of speech is not acknowledged.⁵⁰ True accounts from children often go under reported or unsupported,⁵¹ can be extremely brief, overlooked or merely glossed over in favour of an author's perspective or agenda.⁵² As noted by Kirk,⁵³ research with children tends to be unequal in terms of the power relation between children and adults. Our methodology allowed us to utilize visual methods as a prompt to gather player perspectives, feelings and opinions via critical incidents directly involving them. Thus modestly shifting the balance of power within organized youth sport to the children.⁵⁴ As such, we encourage methodologies that prioritize a truer representation of the child voice in order to better understand the complexities of experiences within adult-organized junior sport and indeed that of the further developments within grassroots football.

Disclosure statement

AQ5 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Mahoney et al., 'Organized Activities as Developmental Contexts for Children and Adolescents'.
2. Weir, Etelson, and Brand, 'Parents' Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety and Children's Physical Activity'.

3. Pitchford et al., 'Children in Football: Seen but not Heard'.
4. Wyness, *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*.
5. Houlihan and Lindsey, *Sport Policy in Britain*.
6. Green and Houlihan, 'Governmentality, Modernization, and the "Disciplining" of National Sporting Organizations: Athletics in Australia and the United Kingdom,' Houlihan and Green, 'Modernization and Sport: The Reform of Sport England and UK Sport'.
7. Lusted and O'Gorman, 'The Impact of New Labour's Modernisation Agenda on the English Grass-roots Football Workforce'.
8. The FA, *A Blueprint for the Future of Football*, 63.
9. The FA, *A Charter for Quality*, 9.
10. Ibid.
11. The FA, *Youth Development Review*.
12. Ibid.
13. Brackenridge et al., *Child Welfare in Football: An Exploration of Children's Welfare in the Modern Game*.
14. Wyness, *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*.
15. Mayall, 'Towards a Sociology for Childhood: Thinking from Children's Lives'.
16. Qvortrup, Corsaro, and Honig, *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*.
17. Wyness, *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*.
18. Pitchford et al., 'Children in Football: Seen but not Heard'.
19. Grover, 'Why Won't They Listen To Us? On Giving Power and Voice to Children Participating in Social Research'.
20. Wyness, *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*.
21. The FA, *Youth Development Review*.
22. Brackenridge et al., *Child Welfare in Football: An Exploration of Children's Welfare in the Modern Game*.
23. The FA, *Youth Development Review*.
24. Greig, Taylor, and MacKay, *Doing Research with Children: A Practical Guide*.
25. Cope, Harvey, and Kirk, 'Reflections on Using Visual Research Methods in Sports Coaching'.
26. Ibid.
27. Greig, Taylor, and MacKay, *Doing Research with Children: A Practical Guide*.
28. Angelides, 'The Development of an Efficient Technique for Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data: The Analysis of Critical Incidents'.
29. Tripp, *Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement*, 24–5.
30. Ibid.
31. Recordings and team discussions were undertaken by a research team consisting of students on placement from Edge Hill University and led by representatives from 'Don't X the Line' campaign <http://www.dontxtheline.com/> a charity which aims to enhance the participatory experience of junior grassroots footballers and referees through a number of initiatives.
32. Greig, Taylor, and MacKay, *Doing Research with Children: A Practical Guide*.
33. Tripp, *Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement*, 43.
34. Ibid.
35. This was undertaken by the research team which included representatives from 'Don't X the line' <http://www.dontxtheline.com/> and university staff with significant ongoing and lengthy experience of coaching in grassroots junior football.
36. Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-scale Social Research Projects*.
37. Morgan et al., 'Hearing Children's Voices: Methodological Issues in Conducting Focus Groups with Children Aged 7–11 years'.
38. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 475.
39. Morgan et al., 'Hearing Children's Voices: Methodological Issues in Conducting Focus Groups with Children Aged 7–11 years'.
40. Ibid.
41. Those incidents that are not included in the paper were not selected due either engendering less significant discussion, or because they were similar to specific incidents presented above but again engendered less discussion than the incident included.
42. Bluebond-Langner and Korbin, *Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods: An Introduction to 'Children, Childhoods, and Childhood Studies'*.
43. Walters et al., "'It Just Makes You Feel Invincible': A Foucauldian Analysis of Children's Experiences of Organised Team Sports'.
44. Kavussanu et al., 'Observed Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors in Male and Female Soccer Players'.

45. Shields et al., 'The Sport Behaviour of Youth, Parents and Coaches'.
46. Walters et al., 'It Just Makes You Feel Invincible': A Foucauldian Analysis of Children's Experiences of Organised Team Sports'.
47. Ibid.
48. Cope, Harvey, and Kirk, 'Reflections on Using Visual Research Methods in Sports Coaching'.
49. Thomas and O'Kane, 'Discovering What Children Think: Connections between Research and Practice'.
50. Greig, Taylor, and MacKay, *Doing Research with Children: A Practical Guide*.
51. Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros, 'Drawings, Photos, and Performances: Using Visual Methods with Children'.
52. Allison, 'Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials'.
53. Kirk, 'Methodological and Ethical Issues in Conducting Qualitative Research with Children and Young People: A Literature Review'.
54. Cope, Harvey, and Kirk, 'Reflections on Using Visual Research Methods in Sports Coaching'.

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AQ7 Qvortrup, J., W.A. Corsaro, and M.S. Honig. *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

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